

**Sermon for Reformation Sunday
Trinity Church
October 31, 2010**

I have some fairly deep-seated feelings about the place of the sermon in worship and there are some disciplines associated with that. The sermon is an act of worship, both in its preparation and delivery; and that is an awesome responsibility. The sermon can be humorous and even entertaining, but its purpose is not to entertain. It can be literate and it should certainly engage the minds of everyone, but it is not a classroom lecture. The sermon is a liturgical act which engages the congregation equally with the preacher. Above all, the purpose of the sermon is to elevate the Gospel and the Word that is incarnate in Jesus Christ. I run the risk of violating some of that personal discipline today on this Reformation Sunday, on this eve of All Saints. We'll just have to see how it works out.

The Gospel lesson that we read is an important one and I urge you to read it again and again and draw your own conclusions. That is Christian freedom and responsibility and a gift of the Reformation itself. The lesson has a lot to say about the wideness of Christ's concern, involving both rich and poor. It has a powerful message about the responsibility of those who have plenty for the welfare of those who have little or none. And I'm going to leave that to you, to read, learn, mark and inwardly digest. But I turn elsewhere.

Four hundred ninety-three years ago today, on the eve of All Saints Day, an Augustinian priest and doctor of theology at the small university of Erfurt in Germany did something that was entirely commonplace and ordinary for university professors in the late middle ages. He posted a list of propositions he would debate with any scholar who might be willing to take up the challenge. The propositions, 95 of them, called into question the sacramental authority of the Roman Catholic church, which at the time through that sacramental system, controlled, or sought to control, every aspect of every human life from birth to death.

It was an ordinary, unremarkable act, but Dr. Martin Luther did not reckon with the unintended consequences of what he did. Those consequences changed the course of European history and beyond that to the histories of all the peoples and places that were affected by European civilization. We cannot imagine, today, the

religious, political and social upheaval that Luther's propositions produced. The tinder had been laid for a wild fire, waiting only for a spark.

In many ways, it was a matter of timing. For two hundred years, there had been rumblings of dissent from the strict control of sacramental authority, especially when that authority was wielded by human beings who were seen as both selfish and corrupt. New nationalisms were breaking up the Middle Ages image of an united Christendom. The Renaissance had created new interest in the ancient languages and scholars had begun to use those tools in a re-examination of the Bible and the core of its message. And then, there was an evolution in information technology: the printing press. In hours, tracts and essays could be printed and circulated across whole cities and country-sides.

We Presbyterians trace our church ancestry to John Calvin, French lawyer, who picked up the torch of Reformation and established its center in Geneva, Switzerland. Calvinism spread to the British Isles with the preaching and writing of John Knox. In the late 1500's as the Reformation swept over England and there was bitter debate over whether the Church of England should be Episcopal or Presbyterian. It was the Calvinist Puritans, driven out of England, who brought the Reformation to colonial America,(where, as Garrison Keillor once quipped, they could do unto others as others had done unto them!)

I have to confess that I celebrate Reformation Sunday with mixed feelings. The Reformation was responsible for a new birth of spiritual freedom that translated into new political freedoms. It gave a powerful thrust to broader education. It has also fostered arid and judgmental pieties at the expense of Christian charity. It was responsible, too, for centuries of bloodshed in the name of Christian religion. And it shattered the Body of Christ into a multitude of disputacious factions.

On the positive side, the Calvinist Reformation gave to the Reformed Churches – and that includes the Presbyterian churches -- It gave to the Reformed churches the principle that the Church is always open to re-formation. The motto is in Latin: "*Reformata et semper reformanda*" – "Reformed and always reforming." That gives me license as a Presbyterian to voice what is my own hope and prayer.

The hope is that this day will celebrate not a history of the Reformation, but the vision of a transformation; that it will envision the future that I believe was in the mind of Luther himself: not the establishment of a new church, not the celebration of division and hostility, but the recovery of an ancient and authentic

vision of the universal church – the church that is truly catholic as all of us affirm in our creeds. I know that there are many Christians across the world that share this vision; and that dream lies at the center of what we, in our little way, are about here in Trinity Church, Park Rapids; with this marvelous diversity of Christian backgrounds and spiritual pilgrimages, however small our numbers.

I wonder if the timing of Luther's challenge, there in the Erfurt university on the eve of All Saints was accidental or carefully chosen. I'd like to believe that Luther's testimony was timed to demonstrate his vision of the communion of saints, that there is a spiritual unity, not just across the world in a particular time, but across all of time and uniting in Christ all generations of God's holy people, all of his saints. That is a source of strength and comfort for those of us who soldier on. It was the author of the Letter to the Hebrews who wrote that "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

Standing before a court that had both civil and religious authority and the power of life and death, with the books he had written piled in front of him, Luther was asked to deny what he had written. He didn't answer immediately, but asked for an overnight recess to pray and consider his answer. In the morning, when the question was repeated he gave the answer that has rung down through the ages as a prime example of Christian courage. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.

For us as a lasting legacy, Luther left his great hymns and it is here that the two themes of the day converge: The healthy spirit of the Reformation was saved by Luther's hymns, for they spoke to hearts and minds and served to temper the arid and cerebral theologizing. Some of you may have known Gar Lockram, who once lived in Park Rapids, and who died several years ago. He was a Lutheran, a great teacher and conductor of choral music in high schools. Visiting with him one day, we were agreeing that many of our familiar hymns, if we read the words carefully make pretty indifferent poetry. I remarked that I could overlook that because for me the faith was about seventy-five percent in the music anyway. Gar replied, "Oh, no! It's all in the music." That might well have been Gar's epitaph. It echoes the words of St. Augustine – and remember that Luther had been an Augustinian. Augustine said, "Let us sing alleluias here on earth while we still live in anxiety, so that we may sing them one day in heaven in full security. Here they are sung in hope, there in hope's fulfillment. So then let us sing them now, not in order to

enjoy a life of pleasure, but in order to lighten our labors. You should sing as wayfarers do: sing, but continue your journey. Sing, then, but keep going! Sing, but keep going.”

As I was thinking about all of this, I was reminded of a striking parallel with an event in my own life about 45 years ago. The University of Nigeria was a raw new institution in a fairly remote area of that newly-independent country. In the absence of television or other forms of commercial entertainment, we had to contrive our own amusements. In that setting, I was asked by the Students Union to debate with a young Nigerian Catholic bishop by the name of Francis Arinze. The format of the debate was a lot like the so-called “debates” that are a part of our political campaigns: answering questions from a moderator or panel of questioners. The setting was the large Arts Theatre lecture hall and there were, I would say, two or three hundred students in attendance. I remember only one fragment from that evening’s ordeal. It had to do with the authority of the church in matters of faith and morals. My point was that those things are matters for the free decision of free individuals according to their own consciences. This young bishop responded that there could only be one truth and that the truth lay with the church’s teaching. His punch line was “two and two always make four. There can be no other answer.” The students cheered. My answer was to say that perhaps the bishop’s arithmetic actually added two and two to make five, that

mine added up to three and that the truth lay between us. The students cheered louder!

Bishop Arinze was not persuaded. I know that because I learned later that he had become a Cardinal and a powerful member of the papal curia in Rome. Some believed that he might actually become the first African pope! A couple of years ago, out of curiosity, I checked him out on the Internet. I “googled” him and discovered that, in a commencement speech at Georgetown University, he had appalled the faculty by challenging their academic freedom in almost the identical terms he had used in Nsukka forty years earlier! There can be only one truth. The Church’s teaching is not to be challenged, certainly not in a Catholic university.